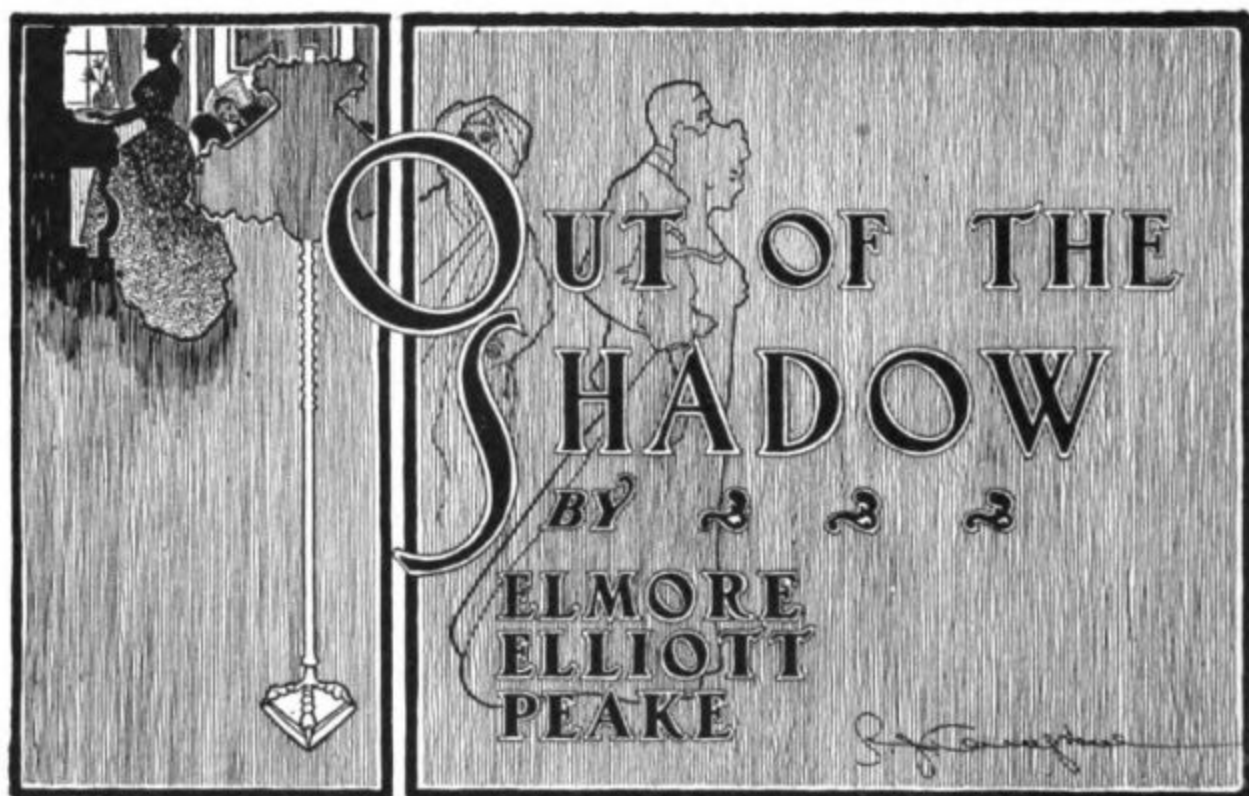




WHEN I walked into the private office of old John Pilsinger, president and chief owner of the Northwestern Paper Bag Company, I saw at once that the tall, stern old man was a little disappointed in his new superintendent. The thought was in his mind that perhaps he had taken too young a man. I was but twenty-eight. However, with that fairness for which he was esteemed, he conducted me through the big mill, listening attentively and silently to my comments and suggestions, and left me at the little room provided for my use with the brief remark, "Mr. Benson, in your department you are supreme." It meant undivided success or undivided failure.

A week later he sent for me. I entered his office with quickened pulse, for I had felt that this first week was probationary. "Mr. Benson," said he, gravely, scarcely lifting his serene blue eyes from the papers before him, "my wife and I would be glad to have you stop with us, if you see fit. Our home is not a lively place. There are only two old people and our little girl—our little granddaughter. We live simply, but I think, perhaps, you will find our home more congenial than your present quarters. We shall charge five dollars a week for room and board."

I moved my effects that afternoon—with

pardonable exultation, I hope—over to the large old balconied, moss-grown brick house. With a little effort I might have imagined myself in the palace of a colonial governor. The furniture was heavy, dark and antique; my bed was draped with purple curtains; the walls were hung with portraits of dignified, rather stupid-looking old men and sweet-faced old ladies, all in those costumes of the past that betokened people of position. The windows looked out upon a small park, through the trees of which Rock river gleamed in the distance.

Sunday breakfast was my first meal in the house. There I was presented to the "little granddaughter." She was a tall, slender young woman of perhaps twenty-two, with a delicate, pearly complexion and masses of golden-bronze hair. The dignity of her grandfather, softened by youth and sex, sat upon her mouth, and slumbered in her eyes. Long association with the courtly old people had left its mark upon her. She spoke in low, carefully modulated tones. Yet under and through all this stateliness, which of itself might have become oppressive, I felt the presence of a passionate nature, firmly bound but ever tugging at its chains. I saw it flicker in her darkling eyes; I heard it quiver in her soft, hushed

laughter. She wore a loose-flowing gown the like of which I had never seen before, with sleeves that flared at the wrists and occasionally revealed a glimpse of her snowy forearm.

After dinner, while I was sitting out under the old trees, Miss Doe—her name was Frances—strolled gracefully and easily down the graveled walk toward me, clad in a narrow gray gown.

"Would you care to walk?" she asked, pausing at my bench.

She walked me five miles that lovely Sunday afternoon, half of the distance along the rough banks of the river. The pace she set for the last mile was trying to my aching calves. I looked at her sharply to see if she were trying to make me cry for quarter. I would have died first. But her face, as open as a book, expressed nothing but a wholesome pleasure in the brisk exercise. When we reached home, we sat down on a bench to rest. Her bosom was heaving rapidly, and her cheeks were much flushed.

"Are you tired?" she gasped, smiling to hide her distress.

"No, but I'm afraid you are."

"I am—a little," she confessed. "I am strong and healthy, but I come of a weak-lunged family, and our doctor and grandpa think I should take long walks. I used to walk seven and eight and even ten miles. But I think that was too much. It made me so tired!"

I wanted to tell her that I thought five miles too much, but I decided to wait until I had known her longer.

After resting a few moments, she asked me if I liked music. I told her I did. She said she would play for me, and we went into the parlor. I had seldom heard such playing. I looked at her again to see if she had planned a tour de force. I soon discovered how groundless the suspicion was. Music was Miss Doe's passion in life. She seemed to live at the piano. No matter when I might come home, the instrument was going.

She had had no systematic training in music. As a child she had taken lessons, but she read notes only indifferently. She would pick out a new work with some labor, and then it was hers forever. She added to or took from, as suited her

whim of the moment. She changed the time, lengthened or shortened notes, and elaborated the theme into bewildering variations. If she heard some one else play a composition, it was hers, just the same. When her grandfather took her to the city to hear an opera, she brought it all back with her—not, perhaps, as the composer wrote it, but as suited herself.

Shortly after I went to the Pilsingers' to live, two of our traveling men who happened to be at the factory on the same day, were invited to the house that night. One of them was a finished performer on the guitar, the other on the banjo. They both lived in Chicago, were neighbors, and had played together a great deal. Doe was in ecstasy. After giving them her banjo and guitar, she ran out, and came back triumphantly in a few minutes with one of the village boys—a first-rate violinist—and one of the neighbors' girls, who played the mandolin skilfully. Doe, of course, took the piano.

It seemed to me that they played everything that I had ever heard, besides a great deal that I had not heard. At last they struck the "Ducky's Dream." The violin and the mandolin held their own, as they had all evening, until the banjo and the guitar began to run off into fantastic variations. I saw the salesmen exchange significant glances, and I have no doubt the rascals had practised the thing together, and had thrown more than one set of musicians out by the trick. The violinist faltered, struck a feeble note here and there, and then dropped out, laughing shamefacedly. A moment later, the mandolin stopped also.

I saw Doe drop her head forward, and smile a curious little, knowing smile, but she never paused. The music grew fast and furious; it swept up and down the scale with a fierce, wild rhythm. But wherever it went, or whatever it did, Doe was with it. Not once did she falter or strike a discordant note; and so quick were her fingers, so keen was her musical instinct, that I could hardly believe she was only following.

The salesmen redoubled their efforts. This was apparently unobserved by Doe, for her fingers continued to sweep up and down the keyboard with the same marvel-

ous speed and lightness. As I watched the bending of her lithe body, the play of her arms and shoulders, my heart swelled. She was only a girl, and they were men; and there was something heroic about the battle she was giving.

At last the banjo began to lag, and then both it and the guitar were suddenly silent. Doe went on alone, and I think she then surpassed the wildest flight that had gone before. The long-continued strain was beginning to tell on me even, and I had done nothing but listen. My nerves leaped in sympathy with every throbbing note. The mandolinist, a very delicate, sensitive girl, was distinctly pale.

Suddenly Doe broke off and swung around to her astonished audience. Her eyes were sparkling. Her cheeks were flaming red.

"What—what—what in heaven can excel that?" she cried, with a nervous laugh. She arose, turned blankly toward me, took a step forward, staggered and fell. She quickly regained consciousness, but it was a week before the terrific drain on her vital forces was made good.

I once told Doe's grandfather that such genius as hers should not be allowed to run to rank growth. He was silent for a moment, and then answered, gently: "Young man, we are glad to keep her with us on any condition. If we stimulated her genius, it would kill her. But if I were sure of her health; if I had been sure of it——" He broke off, and added, "Her father was a great musician, in the rough." I saw he had more to say, and after a moment he continued, quietly: "He was also a gambler and a drunkard. Save for that"—I knew he meant Doe's musical genius—"she is her mother's child."

Sunday evening was Doe's favorite time. As the shadows gathered, and the outlines of the furniture began to blur and grow fantastic, and vanish, the music would grow softer and weirder and sweeter. I used to listen until my spirit, too, would rouse itself, shake off its dust, stretch its wings, and fly away, star-spaces above. The serenity, the happiness, of those hours, were indescribable. The old folks enjoyed them, too. At such times they would sit in their favorite room across the hall, in the twilight, as silent as worshipers at a shrine. They were worshipers.

One Sunday evening Doe was in an unusually transcendental mood. Her slender figure, clad in white, seemed in the gloom like a sylph hovering between earth and heaven. I was standing by her side this time, instead of lying on the couch. Without premeditation, almost without volition, I bent down and kissed her. It was the first kiss, but she gave it as simply, sweetly and chastely as a wife. When she felt my arm upon her neck, she made no movement to escape or resist. She knew I loved her.

Thus was our troth plighted. It was a long time before I slept that night. I felt a joy I had never known before. I was not myself, but another—far better. I expected never to do another selfish, ignoble deed. Such deeds of this kind as I had been guilty of in the past, brought the blood of shame to my face. Yet no remorse could for an instant keep down my vaulting happiness just then, for I felt too sure of my future integrity. Finally, when I did get to sleep, I tossed the rest of the night.

In the morning, on my way to breakfast, I met Doe just outside the dining-room. It might have been her first day on earth, she looked so pure and innocent. There was just enough sleep left in her eyes to give her a slightly bewildered air—as though she were a butterfly on its first flight out into the great dazzling world of sunshine and flowers. She waited until I came up to her; and, laying a hand upon each of my shoulders, she lightly touched my lips. Then, drawing herself closer with a little clinging motion, she whispered, "Could you sleep?"

When I answered No, she let her arms slip around my neck, and murmured, happily, "I was so afraid you could, dear!"

The summer weeks and months were of a piece with this. We walked, rode, boated, played, sang and—loved. At the last, though, I was very guarded in my demonstrations. Sometimes a whole day would pass without my kissing her. For I knew that anything too closely approaching the sensuous would repel her spiritual nature. She had passion, and plenty of it; but it was of a kind that found a higher vent than kisses and caresses. Sometimes I feared that it was too ethereal for me.



She would be so discouragingly cold and unresponsive for days at a time. Frequently a long-withheld caress of mine would be received by her with provoking passivity, and I have known her to seem actually happy when the dulllest kind of company broke in on our privacy. Such natures flash fire only in rare moments, and the man who would force the spark must strike with matchless skill.

When this apparent indifference of hers reached a certain stage, my pride would rebel and forbid any advances on my part. Our intercourse would then be almost formal for a day or two. This caused me much unhappiness, but I never loved her the less; nor, I am convinced, did she love me less. For the tide always turned, and then her love came back in an overwhelming flood. She could ill bear to have me out of her sight a moment; her eyes, lustrous with love, drank in every gesture of mine. She was uneasy if I was not continually petting her with hand or voice. Yet in even these melting moments she never chid me for any past coldness of mine, never begged forgiveness for any of hers. I doubt that she was conscious of either.

But that she was not entirely blind during these frosts of her affections, was manifested to me with rather uncomfortable vividness. A two days' coolness between us was followed by a gathering of musical people at the house, most of whom were out-of-town guests. Doe, as was usual on such occasions, was in a tempest of happiness, and was prodigal with her favors. None, though, came my way. Indeed, I felt myself the victim, for once, of a studied neglect. I played no instrument myself, and I may have been a little sensitive on that point. At least, smarting under my wrongs, real or fancied, I turned for amusement, and possibly revenge, to a young woman that I knew Doe disliked—a very attractive, vivacious brunette—who also took no part in the musical program; and we were soon absorbed in a spirited conversation.

I saw before long that Doe was stealing glances at us from her place at the piano. She was almost incapable of anger; but—absorbed as I pretended to be—I could see that her eyes were full of sad reproach.

Her rush of spirits subsided; she grew grave, played perfunctorily, and finally stopped altogether. When the guests had gone to their rooms, she began to place her numerous instruments away in their cases. Her lips were tightly set and her nostrils quivered. I made a pretense of whistling, meanwhile. When I could stand it no longer, I took her in my arms and asked her, hypocritically enough, what the trouble was.

"Oh, Ben!" she said, "I am so unhappy!"

"And what makes you so unhappy?"

"I can't tell you," she sobbed, with her head on my shoulder; and more than that I could not get her to say. Her loyalty touched me; and when I realized how guiltless she had been, how she had suffered under the blow I had dealt her, and how utterly helpless she was to parry it; when I reflected that my senseless jealousy had dragged her out of a heaven of delight, and cast her down into a hell of bruised heart, my abasement was complete. Before I let her go, I had made her happy again. But no matter how skilfully a man may heal such a wound, he must be little less than a magician to remove the scar.

Doe began to decline in August, and by September she was noticeably thinner and paler. She was short-breathed, and tired easily. For a while after this change, we took our walk as usual in the cool of early morning. I was very careful of her, and as soon as a red spot began to burn in her cheek, I would order a halt. But with every walk this spot seemed to appear sooner, and at last it made her gasp pitifully to walk only a few blocks.

I attributed her weakness to the hot weather; but the glorious, bracing autumn days brought no new life to her. It was hard to get her out of the house; and once I had her out, I was always glad to take her back. Her palpitating bosom and labored breathing, her slow, uncertain gait, seemed such a mockery of her former vigor. She knew it, too, and tried to hide it from me.

The family physician had been prescribing for her, but without any apparent benefit; and at last I told Mr. Pilsinger that I feared something serious.

"Yes, yes!" he said, sharply. "I have seen it. We'll have the doctors out from the city."

The promptness with which he proposed this extreme course, the calm desperation in his voice, stunned me, and I sank into a chair. He glanced at me queerly a moment, and then stealthily withdrew his eyes.

"This decline is not rare in young girls, I believe," he added; and for the first time in my life I doubted his sincerity.

That afternoon Doctor Markley, the family physician, went up to the house with orders from the old man to make a careful examination of Doe. He was a kind-hearted, rosy-cheeked, incapable old fellow. On this occasion, he pinched her cheeks—as she laughingly told me—patted her on the head, joked her in a paternal way, and prescribed another tincture. I don't know what report he made, but that evening Mr. Pilsinger told me he had sent to Chicago for an eminent lung specialist. At the breakfast-table the next morning he said, with affected carelessness:

"Dido, Doctor Manx is coming out to-day to see you. If there is anything wrong, we want to find it out and cure it—while it's easy."

Doe turned a shade paler, pale as she already was. After breakfast, when we were alone she slipped her poor wasting form into my arms, and held it tightly there for a long time, without a word. In sober truth, I could at that moment have cheerfully, joyfully laid down my own robust life for hers. This flying to me as to a refuge, this silent appeal to me to help her in her lonely, terrifying struggle against her fell foe, was ineffably touching.

Doctor Manx, after his visit, stopped at the office on his way to the train and reported to Mr. Pilsinger. As soon as the doctor left, I was summoned.

"My boy," the old man began—he usually called me "Young man"—"you love Doe."

"Yes, sir."

"Then it is your right, no less than mine, to know that there is absolutely no hope," he said, in tones that rang in my ears like the knell of doom.

"How long does he give her?" I asked, as steadily as I could.

"Ninety days," he answered, pitilessly.

"He may be mistaken," I protested, though without hope.

"Yes, doctors have been mistaken before," the old man answered, softly patting his knee. "We will have the others out."

Four others came. One thought there was a fighting chance; the other three agreed with Doctor Manx that there was no hope. I then suggested a change of climate—Colorado, California.

"No!" said old John, almost fiercely. "Three daughters and two sons of mine—all the children I ever had—died in those inhospitable wilds. When little Dido goes, it will be from here, my boy, under our last ministering touches—her grandmother's and mine and yours."

"Have you told her?" I asked, my throat aching.

"Yes," said he. "She knows it. She will be a heroine."

The weeks that followed at the old homestead cannot be called gloomy. They were more like a sweet, spiritual calm. There was pain—sharp, stinging pain for the helpless spectators of the fading flower—but it came and went. Trifling as it may seem, the most oppressive feature of the change was the silence of the piano, for playing was usually too hard work for Doe. On those rare occasions when she did play, I noticed that she stooped somewhat, from the weariness that never left her.

We kept her out of doors whenever the weather permitted, and I spent many an afternoon driving her slowly around the neighborhood.

Doe accepted her fate with serene resignation; she was always cheerful, and often blithe. She graciously and languidly accepted our suggestions and caresses, sometimes laughing at us, in her gentle way, for humoring her so much.

Our feelings were seldom allowed to master us before her, for she had grown so intensely sympathetic that such exhibitions gave her great pain. Yet it was sometimes very hard to bear up. One afternoon she led me to a little young grape-vine, perhaps a yard long.

"I planted that," she said, "and you must always call it mine. I told Jim to bank it this winter, so that it won't freeze."

In the spring you mustn't forget to have him put a little rack up for it."

I burst into tears, at which she turned her eyes—so great and beautiful and lustrous—upon me reproachfully. "Please don't, Ben," said she, pleadingly. "You said you were reconciled. If you act this way, I shall think you are not; and we can't talk about anything—before I have to go. It isn't, dearie, as though you were never coming to me again," she added, softly.

"But it will be so long!" I exclaimed, bitterly.

"It won't seem long to me, love," she said, sweetly. "And yet I shall count every day. I could wait for you a million years, and not grow tired."

She was nearly always just as calm and confident. Once, just once, a panic seized her, as though the grim monster that lay in wait for her had shown his horrible likeness beforehand. She threw her arms around my neck, and with an intensity that pierced me through and through begged piteously for me to save her, to make her well, to drive death away, and not to let them put her in the cold, dark ground. The fear lasted but a moment, and then she regained control of herself.

We were sitting in a sunny window-seat one day in early November. She had been unusually taciturn all day, and seemed uneasy and confused about something. Her eyes were strangely bright.

"Ben," she said, quickly dropping her hand on my arm, and perceptibly mastering some emotion, "would you like to marry me—before? Or wouldn't you?" she added, hastily, mistaking my change of expression. "Would you like to look forward to going to your wife, or would you rather it should be your sweetheart?"

"Whom would you sooner wait for—your husband or your sweetheart?" I asked.

"My husband!" she whispered, with eyes like stars.

When I spoke to the old man about it, he said at once, "My boy, that is for you to decide." I told him I had already decided, and his answer was: "I am glad. We must do all we can for the little girl."

We were married in the old folks' sitting-room, before them only, just at

dusk. Doe had been flushed and excited all day, but when she took her place at my side, her serenity returned. Her eyes were supernaturally bright, though, and when she turned and kissed me she looked more like an angel than a woman. The tears ran down the old preacher's withered cheeks, and Mrs. Pilsinger gave way for the first time in my presence. A marriage means something to a woman, even at seventy-five.

That night, as we sat alone in the parlor, Doe softly began to sob. "Oh, husband!" she cried, "I want to live! I want to live! I want to stay with you! Why won't God let me?"

Poor little girl! The momentary glimpse given her of domestic life, with the man of her choice—so dear to every true woman—had unnerved her. I soon soothed her, but from that moment her tranquillity was gone. I had once thought that she was giving up life too easily, and had told her that she must not rely too much on the doctor. That was while there was yet hope. She had only answered, with a little surprised look, "Why, Ben, don't you suppose I want to live?" But now, when hope was gone, when disease had undermined her last stronghold, she began to fight. She habitually wore a fixed, determined look, utterly foreign to her yielding nature. She forced herself to sit at the piano an hour every day, and all our entreaties to the contrary were useless.

This fretting and struggling, we feared, would only hasten the end; but, in spite of everything, she appeared to hold her own. Her languor—even the natural languor of her days of health—was effectually shaken off. Her affections, which in the past had sometimes seemed to slumber, were ceaselessly active. Some great fountain in her heart seemed to have been opened, from which rushed up an unfailing, resistless stream of love. She insisted on having me at her side every moment; and Mr. Pilsinger, regarding this as the beginning of the end, advised me to let the factory go and "stay at home, until——" He turned away without finishing the sentence.

"Ben," she said, one afternoon, with that peculiar light in her eye which I



knew meant perturbation, "I want you to tell me the truth. If I should die, would you ever marry another woman?" She hugged closer to me, with something like childish fear on her face.

Her referring in this way to her early death as a contingency, when she had so often spoken of it as a certainty, surprised me; but I answered promptly—and I did not lie—"No!"

My answer pleased her, and she smiled happily up into my eyes; then, still smiling, she added, very softly: "But you must, dear. Grandpa says I must tell you that you must."

"What if grandpa had not said so?"

"You must," she said, firmly. "It is too long to wait alone."

"Not for me!" I said, solemnly.

"Oh, husband!" she exclaimed, abruptly, panting with sudden excitement, "maybe I can wait with you yet!"

It did begin to seem so, though I dared not breathe my hope to her. The limit set by Doctor Manx was a month past, and I could not see that she had failed any since our marriage. At last I spoke of it to Mr. Pilsinger. He shook his head, and begged me not to deceive myself. They had all gone just that way, he said. Three of them had died before he had learned the treacherous ways of that insidious disease.

But when another month had gone and Doe still held her own, we sent for Doctor Manx again. I stood by while he tapped and gaged her lungs. The last time she had been as impassive as marble. This time she trembled violently, flushed, paled, and scanned his face with drawn intensity. When he was done, he quietly nodded to me and led the way across the hall.

"Mr. Benson," said he, looking me frankly in the eyes, "I am puzzled at her condition. I don't understand it. But if I were to advise you to take her on a long trip through the West, by easy stages, should you build too much hope on it?"

For answer I wrung his hand, and hastened back to Doe. She was still standing in the center of the room, pale but composed. She must have read my face, but she waited for me to speak.

"You are better, sweetheart!" I whispered.

Three days later we had found a home in the dry atmosphere of the eastern foot of the Rocky mountains. The sun rose bright in a perfectly clear sky. A pair of saddle-ponies stood waiting beneath our window while we finished breakfast. The plains stretching away to the east, the foothills and mysterious cañons to the west, were ours to explore. Then began weeks that lengthened into months of enchanting rides. No plans were made for each day. The ponies would be brought around, lunches tied to the saddle-thongs, then we rode away, straying whither the fancy of the hour dictated. The same program was ours for the next day and the next, until a hundred cañons and mountain-trails had become familiar.

When Doe and I returned to Tipton after a six months' absence, she had gained twenty-seven pounds. Her eyes were bright, the flush of life was on her cheeks, her step was quick and elastic. The two old people, from whom we had, childlike, withheld news of her full restoration, stared in speechless joy. Then Doe threw herself into her grandmother's arms.

"Grandma," she cried, "I have a secret for you!"

